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# AFTER SACRIFICE: DEEDS AND WORDS FOR PROTECTION AND CURE

## ABSTRACT

The article examines how ritual, particularly ritual healing, becomes transnational and how the change impacts on its efficacy. It is based on a multi-sited ethnography with the objective of tracing the shifting status of ideas and practices of efficacy in multiple sites that cross-cut the local / global dichotomy. Field work (2011–2012, 2014) started in three Gengbe-speaking villages along the river Mono between Togo and Benin, which shared Vodun and Catholic ritual belief. The ethnographic itinerary continued to the cities of Lome and Cotonou and ended up in Helsinki among diasporic Pentecostal West African people. The argument is that ritual transforms into multiple practices en route and, in order to keep and protect its efficacy, a variety of transnational practices and new cultural meanings are attached to it, especially to the role and the meaning of sacrifice. Drawing on her fieldwork the author argues that for the persons and communities for whom the sacrificial rituals are performed, the experiential significance of the ‘original’ blood sacrifice does not disappear.

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**Keywords:** healing ritual, sacrifice, multi-sited ethnography, diasporic religion, West Africa

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## INTRODUCTION

‘We make use of everything that helps’. This was what a Gengbe<sup>1</sup> woman told me about their healing practices in an interview during my fieldwork. That was, indeed, what they did. The everyday life in the three villages in the delta area of the Mono River that separates Togo and Benin, where I carried out my study, was heavily loaded with rituals; most of them were healing rituals involving a variety of people and practices. It is unsurprising that there were numerous healing practices because people, especially the children, used to be frequently ill; many infants died of febrile diseases before the age

of five.<sup>2</sup> Life expectancy at birth was 54.6 and 59.1 years, for women and men respectively.<sup>3</sup> Yet people also lived a vigorous ritual life outside the context of treating illnesses or healing. Everyday rituals started with morning greetings which could take hours: everyone was to be spoken to in order to create mutuality. The first words in Gengbe that I learned were those for relatives, both the distant ones, such as *evi esron*, son-in-law, and the closer ones in one’s *axometo*, household. After the greeting practices, the meal rituals started with a variety of ceremonies directed to the ancestors, ‘who are already here with us’, as it was said. The statement that the Gengbe women make use of

everything that helps is an example of medical pluralism (e.g., Kleinman 1980), a notion widely used in ethnographic research on illness and healing. It refers to care practices which include multiple healing systems and options within a society. However, the notion suffers from a heavy ethnocentric bias. While ideal pluralism suggests a wide range of healing options from which to choose, the healing systems in the African villages do not refer to a reality of multiple possibilities of getting cured. There are healing practices involving herbs, baths, religious and spiritual practices and protective objects alongside the official health care services of a Western type but they are not necessarily genuine options in the sense of being healed. In the context of high mortality and poverty, in addition to being healed, staying alive was the aim that was attributed to the healing rituals. In a conjunctive mood, as Susan Reynolds Whyte (1997) puts it in her Ugandan ethnography on illness and healing, people in these villages might possibly survive, or not.

In this article,<sup>4</sup> my aim is not only to focus on the plenitude of ritual healing practices at an ethnographic level but to study how ritual becomes transnational and how this change impacts on its efficacy. My method is what I call multi-sited ethnography (e.g., Marcus 1995) which has the objective of tracing the shifting status of ideas and practices in multiple fields and sites that cross-cut the global / local dichotomy. In addition to the Gengbe villages, I conducted field work in Togo's capital, Lome, Benin's economic capital and largest city, Cotonou and in Helsinki among diasporic Pentecostal West African people. I ask which structures and content of ritual change and which persist, using healing ritual in all its multiplicity as a window through which to study this.

In my various fields, ritual appears more or less as a 'mode of sociality', as Robbins (2009, 63; see also Sumiala 2013) puts it. Analytically, I concentrate on the meaning of ritual as a social frame of that very special 'everything' that matters in people's lives. I refer to ritual in the Durkheimian (1995 [1912]) sense as a set of practices and beliefs which crystallize the idea of community, how people connect to society and how the collective experience of a society is produced. Healing is one important thread in this connection and so is religion. Local people did not make a distinction between rituals concerning the worries of the everyday life and those about how to be protected. The Gengbe-speaking people in villages along the Mono River practice Vodou but in the larger villages and cities Catholicism has been powerful since the Portuguese and French political presence in the 17th century. In this part of Africa, Vodou and Catholicism have lived quite a peaceful syncretistic life together. It is the traditional religion, Vodou, however, that offers the existential ground and efficacy for sacrifice, the core of rituals.

From the first hand perspective of people who make use of rituals (see Honkasalo 2015), or those on whose behalf they are performed, this article portrays an itinerary of sacrifice and ritual as a mode of sociality along a route of modernity from West-African villages to the diasporic Catholic and Pentecostal communities of southern Finland's capital area. In between, I make a short excursion to Beninese shantytown life in the country's largest city, and economic center, Cotonou. My argument is that along that route, ritual becomes a plenitude of multiplying practices and a variety of transnational cultural meanings are attached to it. What seem to change profoundly are the role and the meaning of sacrifice. Drawing on

my fieldwork I argue that for the persons and communities for whom the sacrificial rituals are performed, the experiential significance of the 'original' blood sacrifice does not disappear. As a process within a process within a process, as Turner (1977: 201) puts it, sacrificial ritual is merely embedded in the plenitude of changing practices and networks that link various belief systems, economies and everyday lives along the trajectory.

## RITUAL AS A GENGBE MODE OF SOCIALITY

Togbossi:<sup>5</sup> My children most of the time are healthy. It is only during teething that they have some troubles. Usually they have diarrhea for about one week but there is a herb that I prepare for them and they get better. If those herbs sometimes do not help, I bring the ill child to the health center. The one who provided a different experience is my second son whose name is Komla. Everything started when he was four years old. He had a swollen stomach and anemia. His father and I tried everything like herbs we know but it did not help. We supposed it was about worms. We took the ill child to the health center. The doctors asked us to have a medical analysis; we did so but they found nothing that could be the possible cause of the illness. We took him to another health center: the same result. And it happened that he could not stand up and nothing worked. We decided to go to the Bokonon to ask for the cause of the illness. When we arrived at the Bokonon's place he told us that the illness was caused by witches. He asked for some sacrifices for which we should buy a goat, chickens and some stuff. The ceremony is called Koudo and its aim

is avoid the death of the ill child by taking him back from the witches. During this ceremony the Bokonon dug a grave. The ill child was covered by a white cloth and put in the grave then the animals were killed and the blood poured over him. There was also some other stuff the Bokonon used. When the ceremony was over the Bokonon told us to take him back to the health center. When we went back to the health center the doctor gave us medicine and he recovered. He is now thirty years old and he is a soldier.

M [author]: Since then, do you have any protective witchcraft that you use for other children?

T: We use protective jewels or a ring for the children. I have another story about my grandson. He was born at seven months but his mother was a student. So his parents were pleased with the situation. The grandmother of the child was a witch and she swore that the child must not be born. After he was born his mother was not able to breastfeed him because she had no milk. Suddenly he started having fever all the time. I brought him to a health center several time; no results. It was becoming worse and worse and one night he started meowing like a cat. The next day my husband took us to the Bokonon. He told us that the grandmother of his mother was a witch and she wanted to kill him because she didn't want the child to be born, so she wanted to take his soul. So then the Bokonon told us that we should have a reincarnation ceremony for the child to find out who is reincarnated in him. Then we had some other ceremony to avoid the death of the child. At midnight

of the day that we came from the Bokonon, a bewitched bird entered the room although the doors and windows were shut. We tried to catch it but in vain. The following day we returned to the Bokonon and he performed other sacrifices and from that day the child has been well.

When we arrived at the Bokonon's place, he consulted Fa and told us that the illness was caused by a witch. He asked for some things in order to make a sacrifice which would help take back the soul of the child which is hidden somewhere in a big tree, according to what Fa said. After this sacrifice he gave us sacred oil and a black powder and a ring around his left hand. He said every night I should apply this oil on his body and give him the black powder every morning. .... Since then he has never had that kind illness again. But there is still a red cock that we should take back to the Bokonon.

These extracts are from my first interviews with the mothers. What is present from the start is a multiplicity of healing practices, ways of curing and forms of rituals. Life in the sixth poorest country of the world is extremely precarious. The mothers said that as a cure for their children, they made use of all the possible remedies which were available. Hence, traditional herbs,<sup>6</sup> divine consultations and modern medicine go hand in hand and what they are creating for saving their children constitutes a gist of what I call 'ritual plenitude'. However, frequently the mothers did not succeed with either herbs or visits to the health center. The latter were expensive, and people also had to pay for medicines in the pharmacy. If they were excluded from the Western medical options, what remained most powerful for them, therefore, was the divinatory healing ritual. In the interview above, the

mother mentions Fa, who is a divine oracle, the Vodon deity who mediates between this world and the gods. All these contacts are mediated by Fa, which means that they are a part of the divination ritual. A person who is able to consult Fa is a Bokonon (Balawalu in Yoruba), someone who is in charge of both mundane and divine power.<sup>7</sup>

## VODON AND THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE IN RITUAL PRACTICE

The women's main way to earn money in the delta area is palm oil production (Carrere 2010). They prepare the oil in a complicated process and later sell it in the local markets to earn some money of their own.<sup>8</sup> Polygamy is frequent especially in the agricultural areas (see Wuntsch et al. 2006) and women have neither access to inheritance nor the right to own land. Despite Catholicism, a powerful religion in the area for more than four hundred years under the Portuguese and later French colonialism, polygamy is the way of organizing family and traditionally one of the most important cultural modes of demonstrating wealth for men.

Vodon is a cosmology and religion that is shared with many other peoples in the coastal West African area. As a system of belief it is close to the larger Yoruba Orisa religion, which is widely prominent in Nigeria (see, e.g., Idowu 1963). Vodon and Yoruba share a common cosmology that consists of religious, ethical, aesthetic and philosophical dimensions (Aguessy 1971). Vodon is a polysemic term that incorporates a practical, ethical guide for good life, indicates a set of cults dedicated to different divinities and also refers to a worshipper of the cult. Vodon is quite well known for the small sculptures, *bocios*, often called fetishes by Westerners (see, e.g., Pietz 1987) which, after

being ritually activated with animal blood sacrifice, contain a divine power and are able to shape a bridge between this world and the divinities (Augé 1988). According to Preston Blier (1994), Vodon is an oral and sculptural philosophy;<sup>9</sup> until recently, only minor sections of its doctrine existed in written form.

Vodon as a system of thought and an ideology consists of an animistic way of understanding vodon, *houn*, permeating and living in all natural beings and creatures. The environment is full of *aziza*, small but powerful beings. The pantheon consists of 256 gods with four main gods, Sakpata, Heviosso, Agbe and Mami Wata. In addition, the ancestors are included in the pantheon. However, the way of thinking about presence and absence means that the ancestors also live 'here', with humans. In addition, in the coastal West African Vodon and Yoruba-related cosmologies, ancestors are active agents in reincarnation. Not only are they mediators or existential bonds between the worlds but also necessary bodily counterparts of every human to be born. Reincarnation is a core concept of man: with every birth of a newborn, an ancestor, *joto*, the sender and sponsor of the newborn, is born. The ancestors assume a critical role as shapers of individual life and identity. They have an important role as protectors of a child, overseeing her or his moral and physical development (Montilus 1972); according to Montilus, the *joto* also refers to a protective force, a dynamic element which intervenes in the constitution of a person and an individual. The identity of each individual is a representative of the deceased and the *joto* has a vital role both in identity processes and in protection and guidance through the life course. Each person is associated with a range of intercorporeal forces which individually and together form a critical part of identity and moral personhood.

The *joto* responsible for an infant is revealed in a ritual, *Djoto*, carried out within a couple of weeks of birth. Not only does each person select his or her own destiny before birth but each one comes to the world with destiny's mark imprinted on the palm of the hand (Preston Blier 1994). Being a figure of the past (a reincarnated ancestor) and a bearer of death in the family, each infant represents within itself a paradox, someone both more and less than she or he appears to be. Each person is associated with a range of intercorporeal forces, which individually and together form a critical part of identity, moral personhood and means of mastery in local life. Emerging from the otherworld and its divinities, as well as from this world, is a clear if complex picture of the framing of the person—and the whole of reality and the world.

Animal sacrifice is a vital and vigorous element in all the Vodon rituals, be they healing, thanking, calendar or life-crisis rituals. The altars of the divine beings are crowded with offerings, and frequently covered with animal sacrificial blood, egg yolk and feathers. The powerful core of sacrifice is blood, pouring and sprinkled from immolated animals, mostly goats and fowl, notably hens. During the respective rituals, the Bokonon recounts Fa's message from the respective divine beings about which animals he or she wants to be immolated. The Vodons' sacred colours are red and white, related to sacralized blood, power and heat and to coolness and repose, respectively. The flow of blood is what makes the sacrifice powerful, also transferring divine energy to the small sculptures, *bocios*, during the activation ceremonies. The name Vodon (*houn*) originates linguistically from both God and blood; and the latter notion, blood, is associated with movement and with action (Preston Blier 1994: 46–47). *Houn* is



also a signifier of wealth and power. What makes this important in terms of sacrifice is the symbolic meaning of blood, embedded profoundly in the local cosmology and history. In this regard, the exchange with regards the Vodon sacrifice ritual can be portrayed in the words of Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1899]: 97): '[Sacrificial] procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of ceremony is destroyed'. What takes place in the healing ceremonies is an exchange: the person for whom the ritual is performed remains protected and the divinities take the sacrifice in place of the sick person and probably her or his village.

Aiming at the efficacy of the healing ritual, blood sacrifice is the quintessential part of the Vodon ritual process. Sacrifice is performed for a sick person or a community, frequently for both. According to Valeri (1985: 63–67), the transformation in sacrifice affects all parties involved: the sick person, the ritual specialists, the audience, the victim and the elements. Because for the most, illnesses are due to *azeto*, witchcraft or to malevolent human behavior or emotions such as envy, blood sacrifice is powerful in protecting and securing the promise of human life in the face of fear of human malice or evil from the external world. Based on exchange between sacred and profane, on a gift to the divine beings in order to get effective protection, the animal sacrifice is performed by order of the respective god that responds to the oracles, on Fa's request.

## ANCESTORS, ETHICS AND PROTECTIVE BEINGS

In Vodon and Yoruba, the otherworld is considered a mirror image of this world. However, it does not hold true at least in one regard. The emotional life of ancestors corresponds to ours in many ways. As I will describe below in more detail, for the most part the ancestors are good people who protect and guide the living. However, according to several of my informants, ancestors can lose control over their emotions. They can be envious and jealous and they can cause a lot of harm in the form of illness or accident. They can also spoil love relationships, or at least they can try to do so. One of my interviewees, Denise, described her twin sister who died as a newborn. When Denise got married, she encountered a number of difficulties in her relationship. Together with her husband she met the Bokonon who consulted Fa. They were asked for four hens and they were told that the twin sister was extremely jealous because of their relationship. Fa advised the husband to marry the twin sister, too; hence he became married to both of them and the difficulties ended. Denise always carried a small puppet statue with her that represented the ancestral twin sister. As this example shows, the ancestors may want to interact with the members of this world, which can be problematic. They can also put obstacles in the way of the living, or they might simply want to tease and annoy. The ancestors can feel joy or they can be angry. In everyday life people talk to them directly but in complicated situations they conduct consultations through a Bokonon, with the help of Fa, the oracle. The local Vodon priest told me that bad people become bad ancestors and it is not possible to pray for them when they are dead, as is the case in Catholicism. If

someone wants to have an impact on dealings in the afterlife, they may ask for ritual help from the Bokonon and Fa:

M: Bad ancestors? Are there?

Hounsige (the priestess of Vodun cult Sakpata): Some of them are bad. They are like human beings, they can be jealous, some nice...If you are a bad person when you die so you become a bad ancestor. The bad ancestors kneel down in front Big God Segbolissa, begging for eternity. There is a river... if you are bad, you stay on the river shore.

M: Is it possible to pray for people who died as in Catholicism? Do you have praying rituals for dead persons?

H: When someone dies, the first thing is to consult Fa. To ask how she or he should be buried. If you follow what Fa says it can help him or her. When the ancestor is reborn, there are some ceremonies to do if he is a bad person; there are some offerings and some ceremonies to do to help to change the person.

When some dies, after his death and before burying him, people consult Fa. If Fa says there is something to do, then you can follow his prescriptions. The other way is that he remains as bad as he was in real life. [She goes on describing the ceremony of Djoto.] It is our responsibility to take care of this.

M: If the bad ancestors are with us, can they do bad things to us?

H: They can do.

M: Can you have ceremonies for protection?

H: To change him? The only ceremony is to chase him from you. Or her. He will be forever bad. [She continues to detail the Djoto ceremony]

The ancestors are not visible to our senses, people told me. They can be seen in the form of an animal or clouds, but not in their ancestral human shape. Their presence can be sensed, smelled or heard and, during the rituals, it is their voice that is talking through the body in possession.

## SACRIFICE AND POSSESSIVE RITUAL ENCOUNTERS WITH ANCESTORS AND DIVINITIES

In the delta area of the Mono River, possession rituals are carried out as a part of diverse ritual celebrations. Throughout the calendar year, gratitude is expressed in the form of gifts and offerings to the ancestors and divinities which are placed at a variety of altars around the villages and on the roads leading to them. However, the special thanksgiving ritual, the main harvest celebration, is organized around the Catholic Christmas. In the coastal area of Togo and Benin it is followed by the celebration of Mami Wata, the female divinity of the sea and fishermen. In the thanksgiving ritual the ancestors have a special protagonist role as those who are praised. Along with the sacrificial practices, the ancestors are also seen as actors who tell the villagers about the coming year through the means of ancestral possession. The possessed person is able to speak about the future in a voice that is a combination of hers and that of the ancestors. As a syncretic modern celebration in the small seaside



towns, the Janvier 10 ritual, dedicated to the female goddess Mami Wata, embeds in itself a historically layered past. Currently, remembering the history of the slave trade makes the Janvier 10 ritual highly transnational because it is a place where thousands of people of African origin meet. The main celebrations take place in Quidah, in an area that is well known for having been the main harbor for the slave trade between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries (Law 2004).<sup>10</sup> After the leadership in Benin by Mathieu Kérékou (1972–1991, 1996–2006) and his restrictive politics against Vodon, the spiritual movement has also attached to itself new importance due to its political liberation. Janvier 10 is today ‘a celebration of freedom of religion, freedom for Vodon’ (a quote from a minister’s speech at the celebration). In the midst of the Janvier 10 possession rituals to Mami Wata, a goat is offered. The sacrificial process with the immolation is performed for a wide audience in the midst of a ritual celebration that lasts for hours.

## RITUAL AS PROTECTION

Serious illnesses in the villages are for the most part caused by witchcraft, people told me. How to protect oneself is the main question, and in order to succeed with the protection, people make use of everything, as was noted above. According to Claudine:

*Atikesi* [the local name for a deadly feverous disease that corresponds to malaria]<sup>11</sup> is caused by witches but not always. When it gets dark, the witches wrap themselves in the wind and take the form of a bird. Then the bird flies to the village. If the child is sleeping alone, with no one around, the bird takes his soul. Then he loses his energy and gets ill. And if not helped, he dies.

In the focus group interview situation the other mothers nod. On the wall there is a painting of a huge bird that is threatening three small children and a man with a spear trying to kill the bird.<sup>12</sup>

My own experience in the field was that Vodon as a whole, as a cosmological, ethical, and extremely practical and flexible system (see Aguessy 1972; Forte 2010) constituted perfect risk management for people. They were able to make use of all its practicalities, divine objects and ethical rules in their everyday lives. The most powerful means, however, was the divinatory healing ritual. This was performed whenever the illness situation was considered serious. In accordance with pluralistic medical options, the mothers first tried herbs and then Western medicines, if that was possible. The healing ritual was extensive and costly because a large number of people were needed: the Bokonon, the priests, and all the people of the village.<sup>13</sup> Decorations, dancers, ritual clothes and musical instruments were also necessary. Sacrifice is a quintessential process, as Turner (1977) puts it; it is necessary for successful consultation of the oracle and even more so for the divinity to answer. Later, for the gifts of gratification, sacrifices were also used. One or more sacrificial animals were needed, depending upon the requests by Fa and the divinities. The divination ceremony could last for a couple of days, subject to the demands of the respective god (see Olajubu 2012), who transmitted instructions on the subject to the priests and the Bokonon along with instructions for obviating witchcraft and reminding the sick person, parents, family members and each villager of their responsibility to obey the moral order. Sometimes the divine message included a personification of witchcraft, a message that, with respect to the social relationships in the family or in the village could have severe social consequences.

## SOCIAL CHANGE AND CHANGING RITUAL FORMS

During recent decades, social change in Togo and in Benin has been profound, with considerable migration from the villages to the cities resulting in growing shanty towns. It is mainly the biggest farmers and land owners, the traditional healers and Bokonos who have continued to live in the villages. As a consequence, ritual healing processes are nowadays practiced not only in the villages but also in the cities. Much has changed, however, and to my surprise I encountered 'modernized' Vodon healing practices in both Lomé and Cotonou. An excerpt from my field notes is illuminating:

In the healing room a big man, apparently the healer, was sitting in an arm chair, in a huge house with an inner court where his hens, wives and children were playing. In front of him was a TV sending French News from Europe. I came together with two of his neighbors, my informants' children, now living in the capital city. We told [him] that we didn't want a ceremony, only to know how he was working as a practitioner. He took us to the house, where he had an altar with Vodon objects, sacrifices and remnants of rituals, such as dried egg yolk. The healing room was empty with a carpet on the floor. He wanted to have a ceremony for us but the neighbor refused because his mother is Catholic. The healer let us see the yoga room and herb therapy and massage that he had in the other house, just behind an altar he had built for twin burials. 'There are so many twins here and so many die, at least one of them'. He said that he has a special service for this. The sacrificial

process was a central part of his practices. What was new was what I would call the marketing of consumer choice. He had a list of animals he was able to use as sacrifices. As a professional (or was he really?) he had his own recommendations of animals for special purposes, but mainly the ill persons or those close to them could make a choice themselves. This was a flexible practice, he said, also financially.<sup>14</sup>

Later I visited the extensive sacrifice markets in both capital cities where hundreds of dried animals of different species were sold for sacrificial purposes. Anyone could find anything, in addition to dogs and cats, for sacrifice purposes, including protected animals such as crocodiles, hippos, pieces of elephants and serpents.

## 'WE ARE ALL CHRISTIANS NOW'

Profound and ongoing social change was palpable during my first period of field work. An extended drought had destroyed crops and increased poverty in the villages. When I came back in 2014, more than 20 families out of the original 110 from my main village had moved to the capital area. The drought had lasted for almost two years and the river that we used to cross with a boat had almost dried out. The men of the village had built a strong wooden bridge over the river but now it looked a bit sad and ridiculous.

'We are all Christians now', shouted a woman who came to meet me by the river shore. I was wondering what she meant because I knew that she, like many other villagers, was Catholic. She mentioned the name of a Pentecostal Church of Holy Redemption, however, next to our house. They used to have

Sunday ceremonies for at least a hundred people, gathering in a palm roof covered hut. They were singing psalms with melodies that I knew well from my childhood. Another newly converted Pentecostal woman was as joyful and wanted to add that they now had some new remedies as well. Like the Holy Spirit, she said. 'Children do not suffer in *atikesi* so much', she said. The statement created controversy among the women, and some told me that it might be true but now they have had several failed deliveries:<sup>15</sup> bad for the mothers and the babies.

The Vodon priestess Hounsige, who also lived in the village, spoke about the change that was tremendous: '*toutes religieuses*', as she said. Just before I arrived, the Bokonon of the village had died and this had caused an overwhelmingly difficult situation for the village. It was not only because now all the villagers were without his protection and guidance but also because his eldest son, who was supposed to follow his father, had lived in the capital for years. He was currently divorced and had converted to Pentecostalism. Even worse, the second eldest son had also converted. The family could not arrange the funeral ceremony for the Bokonon because of the conflicting situation and this, of course, was a huge problem for the Bokonon's wife, who was a Vodon adept, *vodonsi*. She was in the midst of her seven-week long mortuary ritual; her clothes were unwashed and her hair dirty, as was required in its liminal period.

The Bokonon's death was caused by witches, people told me, though people asked in whispers how much influence the Pentecostals have over a life that is protected, such as that of the Bokonon. Some questions about protection were fearful, some suspicious. I also wondered how this could be true, for all that I had learned of the power of Vodon protection was convincing: Vodon should be powerful enough to safeguard

against witchcraft. In the village no one said anything aloud about any other alternatives. But what if family members—actually one's two sons—become Pentecostals? What happens to the family ties, so important for power in the traditional cosmology? If there were a definite break inside the Bokonon's family and no one were able to continue in his position, 'How is it with the protection of us, the villagers, his wife, and the younger children?' Komlan asked later.<sup>16</sup>

Birgit Meyer (1998) comments on the 'complete break with the past' among Pentecostal converts in her study in Peki and Accra, Ghana. For the converts and the majority of the priests, the conversion to Pentecostalism means rejecting traditional religion, thereby depriving it of its power and empowering the convert's self-control in the present. This signifies becoming modern in social, political and religious respects. However, instead of a complete break, Meyer suggests that an ambiguous situation develops among the converts wherein discourses and ritual practices allow an oscillation between the traditional and the Pentecostal traditions, 'an ambiguity which also characterizes their own lives and which they experience in their own bodies' (Meyer 1998: 340). Rather few studies, if any, have been carried out on the situation among the traditional believers who remain in the villages. In my study, people spoke about a complete break between the Vodon and Pentecostal celebrants. The degree of ambiguity of the situation, the extent to which it renders people powerless and consequently, the question about protection and of the causes of the Bokonon's death all remain open.

People talked about the long drought. The last time it had rained had been more than a year earlier. Some blamed Vodon rain rituals for having been too powerful. People used to manage rain rituals because they wanted to

celebrate funerals and thanksgivings without getting wet (the music is frequently played by amplifiers that can be destroyed in heavy rain). Others blamed the Pentecostals who, along with abandonment of sacrifice, also 'invite the witches to be present in an unrestricted way'.<sup>17</sup> This is why the mothers who practice traditional religion insist that, despite the drought, the children continued to suffer from *atikesi*. Some fishermen from the delta river area were forced to leave their homestead because of the lack of fish. Because of the lack of rain, the direction of the river flow had changed, and now salty water was flowing upriver from the sea. This had caused a change in the type of fish that was being caught: 'Now salty water fish, not good to eat'.<sup>18</sup> In order to reverse the change, some people converted back to Vodon; after ten Pentecostal years, for instance, the chief of a large village turned back to his village.

## IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A SINNER

'Do you participate in the Catholic ceremonies?' I once asked Jocelyne after multiple prayer sessions for her ill uncle. Jocelyn's Beninese family is Catholic. She nods and tells me that sometimes she does. She also tells me that the African women in the Finnish Catholic congregation do not have a welcoming attitude towards her.

We were sitting on the hallway bench of a diasporic Pentecostal church in Helsinki. After the long Sunday ceremony, she wanted to talk to me. After my experiences in the field in West Africa, the lives of the parishioners of the diasporic church looked strange, at first like the total opposite of what I had encountered in the villages and small African towns. How could the Bible become such a basic, necessary text

for people? In several ways it really was. How and with what kind of methods had the women learned to read? Many of them had some elementary school training—at least in Benin where the school system worked—but many had none at all. Some told me stories about the lives of biblical figures which had become important for them.

What reminded me of Africa, however, was the ritual liveliness and magnitude of their everyday life and the structure of the religious rituals. The tight weekly—or almost daily—ritual schedule was reminiscent of that in the village. What was trained and learned took place with ritual repetition, together with other people who were willing and open 'to getting help and settling down in this country', as one woman said—and with the aid of physical togetherness and the rhythm and music that was embodied in them since their own childhood (cf. Robbins 2009: 61). 'Worship is a living sacrifice', it was stated. Worship contains all; it involves the body, the hands, the posture and physical expressions, the priest of the congregation used to repeat.

This was also how the African Catholic Church established its syncretistic practices. The Catholic ceremonies and liturgical music with the Gengbe drum accompaniment were of local African origin and the churches were full of people every Sunday—dressed in a festive way, precisely like the women in the Helsinki and Turku Pentecostal diasporic churches. The Catholic African ceremony, however, had a very traditional structure, with speeches and sermons. In Pentecostal worship people moved and danced, singing, perhaps shouting and hugging each other; sometimes they became possessed by the Holy Spirit. In this bodily regard, the rituals reminded of the Vodon rituals in the villages. If the worship is the Pentecostal version or substitution for sacrifice, it can be powerful

in many ways. But was its powerful ritualized Christian symbol—‘Jesus Christ was killed for our sins and because of that, all become saved’—sufficient in comparison with ‘genuine’ sacrifice, as it was called, the animal sacrifice? What the Pentecostal church emphasized most strictly were the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the meaning of worship as the substitute for sacrifice. The latter was not needed because the spiritual gifts empower and protect against *azeto*, witches, other demonic spirits, impurities and the worldly temptations of a sinner.

I went on discussing with Jocelyne about the exclusionary attitudes which she felt among the Catholic women.

M: Why do you think it works like that?

Jocelyne: It is all about witches. They have witches there all around, in that Catholic parish. They have a special ceremony where the pastor tries to suck them out. We don’t have witches any longer. We don’t have witches.

M: Suck them out?

J: Yes, or perhaps he kicks them out.

She was describing an exorcism ritual in which she had participated in the Catholic parish. She had plans to ask permission to participate in the healing ritual on her own behalf to cure her because she felt that she had a Devil somewhere inside her.<sup>19</sup>

For Jocelyne the most shocking part about the Catholic healing ritual with exorcism was their understanding that a witch is able to inhabit a sick person’s body.

They have witches (the Catholics in Finland) in their bodies. We have the Holy Spirit that comes into us. The Holy Spirit gently takes away our sins. Replaces them with peace. We are sinners and this is the reason we become sick. It makes us good, heals us. This is redemption.

Witches don’t ever come into any one’s body. They come and take your soul and they can cause you harm and illness unless you are not well protected. My mother used to have witch rings [protection rings] for us. Aguagessy [the local Bokonon] asked her for chicken and goats, for too many goats. Mom wanted to protect us. She did and we stayed healthy, all alive, still living in many countries. None of us is living with her. But she did not have enough animals; it was too expensive for her. Finally she gave her chickens and now she is ill. She became poor and we had to leave. This is why I am a Christian now, a missionary. I pray for her but who protects her?<sup>20</sup>

Denise, another woman from the same parish told me that despite her Pentecostal engagement, she sometimes goes to the Catholic church. She prays there for her relatives:

Denise: It is because my Mom believes in that Jesus, not ours. I pray for health for her also from her Jesus.

M: What is your Jesus then?

D: My Jesus, A. [priest of the parish] has told he is there in the prayer. Sometimes I feel I am too lonely only with Him [starts to cry] I feel I need those others too.



M: Which others do you mean?

D: My Mom had all what she called saints. And in Condji [the village where Denise's mother lives in Togo], all the others too; you know them, how do you call them? You Europeans call them spirits, don't you?

## HEALING RITUALS— ATTAINING PLENITUDE

Among the Redeemed Christian healing rituals, as also in other Pentecostal traditions (see e.g. Hovi 2010) prayer is regularly used as a ritual for curing. Praying together with the Minister is a common practice but also something that is practiced alone. The Pentecostal African transnational church does allow contacts with official medical services but has restrictions concerning blood transfusion and some surgical operations. People use Western medicines if they have a doctor's prescription. Some of them have traditional herbs from 'the African home' areas. They are still extremely protective against flu and other diseases caused by cold weather. Due to the idea of 'using everything that helps', some women have visited the Catholic Father for consultation and attempts to be cured.

When it comes to some diseases, especially with symptoms of long lasting pain or sleeplessness, only the 'local ways of healing' are considered effective. Some have travelled to Africa and some have secretly, by phone, asked relatives to offer an animal on their behalf. Blood sacrifice is considered to provide an effective ritual strategy that obviates direct accusations of witchcraft, presented as the core causal aetiologies for such illnesses, yet reminds each parishioner of the responsibility to the moral order of the church.

## AFTER SACRIFICE—IF PLENITUDE FAILS?

In this article, I have studied ritual plenitude from the firsthand perspective of people who make use of ritual both in their everyday life and in the religious organizations. At the level of making use of ritual healing practices, everything that is usable seems to matter. In the challenging situation of poverty and hunger in the developing countries people demonstrate unbelievable creativeness in shaping divine objects out of pieces of metal, rope, chains or calabash, and in planning dance, music, clothes and instruments to play with (see also Harris 2006). The same creativity continues with transnational resources; this is also what they do as 'missionaries' as they call themselves in northern Europe. Regarding healing rituals (with a genuine combination of sacred and domestic!) they are able to combine, replace and make syncretistic use of a variety of different practices. The diasporic Pentecostal healing ritual has, however, a very strict limit in one specific sense: the sacrifice.

During my itinerary of tracing the changes in ritual practices from the West African delta area to the Finnish capital city, I came across a profound change in the meaning and symbolic form of sacrifice, the ritual's 'quintessential process'. My itinerary started with ceremonies including animal sacrifice, crucial in all Vodou healing and divine rituals. A scarcity of sacrificial resources could make people poor and lost their homes, but without a blood sacrifice a ritual was not considered effective. The required type and magnitude of the sacrifice was asked of the gods through Fa with help of a Bokonon or Balawalo, a mediator between gods and humans. The mediating role of sacrifice between profane and sacred was important, as was the exchange.



The Vodon sacrifice was a typical gift, given as a request for protection but also something that redeems the sick (cf. Valeri 1985: 62). Most Catholic priests in the local area closed their eyes to the use of animal sacrifice—if people used effective rituals and became healed, it was something that was largely allowed.<sup>21</sup> Some humble Fathers admitted that their ways of understanding blood sacrifice as a prototype of Christ's atonement, 'the perfect gift of our Lord', as Father Marcel secretly said to me about the Eucharist, was not very distant from the villagers' understanding of blood sacrifice, and they knew it. Modern urban Vodon healers also made use of animal sacrifices; the one I visited had a list of the animals and their special effects on healing on the wall of his waiting room.

People in the Helsinki Pentecostal church were actively training themselves, with the help of their pastors and ministers, to become proper believers, missionaries and modern and competent northern European citizens. In a disciplined way, they were studying new social and ethical guides and rules about how to take responsibility for one's own life in diaspora and how to train one's agency, become sufficiently individual, a self, as it was phrased in the training class meeting where they were told that Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all. They were in a subjectification process where the old moral codes, such as observance of taboos and sacrifice, were gradually replaced with those of Christianity. Becoming a modern person meant that moral danger was moved gradually from the outside, from the witches, to the inside of the sinful person. However, lost in the Pentecostal abandonment of taboo observances and sacrifice are not only the two moral codes but also the forms of subjectification that were connected with them. Even the techniques of self-formation are condemned, as Robbins (2004a: 223–224) crystallizes this process.

Along the long route to modernity, how does ritual become transnational and how does the change impact on its efficacy? How the Holy Spirit can cure without the benefit of sacrifice—or without materiality of the blessed objects—has been a lively topic in the recent discussions in anthropology of religion (e.g. Engelke 2007: 224–243). In addition to ritual, the problem of mediation embraces an intriguing approach to the question of the efficacy of the changing healing ritual.

In this article, I have used the healing ritual as a window onto the ritual change from traditional religion to Christianity—from Vodon to Catholicism and Pentecostalism—and the change within Christianity. African Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity accepts 'the ontological claims of traditional religion concerning the existence of gods, ancestral spirits and their powers, but it does not agree on the moral values attached to them', suggests Kallinen (2014), who has carried out his field work in Ghana (see also Robbins 2004b). This is less ambiguously the case with the diasporic Redeemed Christian Church of God, practicing in northern Europe.

There is a complete break with the past; however, it includes ambiguity which characterizes people's lives and which they experience in their own bodies, as Meyer (1998) concludes. There is some possibility for negotiation with regards family members and ill persons, especially children. This is what the parish members are committed to. In the transnational situation, after sacrifice, some people travelled back to encounter their African families in their search for a powerful healing ritual. In some existential situations, people still resort to sacrifice, as Robbins (2004a: 222) describes in another context. Some are cured. Multiple stories are told. At the lived level of experience the efficacy of the 'home

*traitement*<sup>22</sup>—the remedial effects of the sacrificial ritual is undeniable, some said. All who had travelled were pleased to have met their elderly relatives; meeting them is an ethical issue, one of conscience, with Vodon, Catholic and Pentecostal origins. Relatedness and taking care of the elderly relatives is an embodied ethical principle and perhaps it heals if one is able to realize it: the very special everything that matters in people's lives.

## NOTES

- 1 Gengbe is an ethnic and language group with several dialects that belongs to Gbe languages, spoken from coastal West Nigeria (Fon-dialects) to Ghana (Ewe). I did my field work in the delta area of the River Mono that separates Togo from Benin.
- 2 The mortality rate of children under 5 is 90/100,000 (UNICEF 2012).
- 3 [http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation\\_strategy/ccsbrief\\_ben\\_09\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/countryfocus/cooperation_strategy/ccsbrief_ben_09_en.pdf). and <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/togo-life-expectancy>
- 4 The research for this article was funded by the grant 266573 (Mind and the Other) of the Academy of Finland.
- 5 I carried out my field work in three villages in 2011–2012 and 2014. During this time I conducted altogether 20 personal and six focus-group interviews with mothers, and interviewed the village chiefs, both Catholic and Vodon priests, and four Bokonons. In 2014 I conducted six follow-up interviews with mothers and two with the chefs in two villages and visited the local health center. In addition, I participated in divinatory healing ceremonies and thanksgiving rituals as well as a variety of healing situations. All the interviews were carried out in Gengbe with an interpreter. We jointly translated the interviews from Gengbe to French and English and then transcribed all the interviews verbatim. I have changed the names of the informants.
- 6 See, e.g., Hermans et al. (2004).
- 7 According to Mahougnon Kakpo, Professor of African literature at the University of Abomey-Calavi, Cotonou, Fa is a node in the divination of Vodon, the genuine mediator between the humans and divinities but also a point where time of origin unites with the profane (Kakpo 2006).
- 8 See [http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Oil\\_Palm\\_in\\_Africa\\_2013.pdf](http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Oil_Palm_in_Africa_2013.pdf), p. 10. See also <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i2050e/i2050e.pdf>
- 9 See also Forte 2010.
- 10 Quidah is a place where tens of thousands people both from local areas and from the Western diaspora meet at the Janvier 10. The festival is about commemorating the violent history, about future possibilities, especially in terms of music, and a festival of Vodon.
- 11 The notions do not precisely correspond with each other because *atikesi*, as a folk category, is a descriptive term and has a broader meaning, also referring to feverous illness more generally. In addition to witchcraft, the main causes are considered hot sun, a heavy work load and maternal deprivation. Nevertheless, bed nets were also used in the villages.
- 12 Focus group interview, December 8, 2011. When I present my data in this article, I make use of both the transcribed interviews and my field notes which I took in the focus group interview situation.
- 13 The Bokonon and the priests did not receive monetary payment.
- 14 Field notes, January 2, 2012.
- 15 People were asking whether this was really due to Pentecostalism. The distance to the closest hospital was about 15 kilometers and the motorbike back seat were used also used to get pregnant women to delivery centers. *Houn me vi* was the term for a baby that was born on a motorbike. Their numbers were 'too high' said the chief of the village, who was also a motorbike taxi driver.
- 16 Interview with Komlan later, in Helsinki in 2014, half a year after my field work.
- 17 Komlan, an interviewee, January 14, 2014.
- 18 Interview, 24 January, 2014.
- 19 An interview in Helsinki, September 12, 2014.
- 20 An interview in Helsinki, September 12, 2014.
- 21 Interview with Father Marcel, January 12, 2012.
- 22 A term that the parish members used frequently of home trips to 'our places of origin', taken with the aim of getting someone properly cured.

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